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### Repatriation and the psychological contract

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## **Repatriation and the Psychological Contract: A Saudi Arabian Comparative Study**

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### **Abstract**

This research explores repatriates' perceptions of their psychological contract pre and post international assignment, upon return to Saudi Arabia. As international assignments can last several years, expectations are likely to change, to the extent that repatriates perceive a gap between their expectations and organizational obligations upon their return. The paper draws on findings from two case studies. These revealed significant differences across the two organizations indicating that human resource policies and practices, as well as informal organizational norms, specifically associated with the expatriation and repatriation process, can have a profound impact on repatriates' perceptions of whether their psychological contracts have been fulfilled or breached upon their return. The findings also demonstrate the importance of well-defined, explicit HR policies and practices, particularly regarding career development/promotion, if repatriates are to perceive that their psychological contract has been fulfilled upon their return.

**Keywords:** repatriation, psychological contract, international assignment, HR practices.

## Introduction

Globalization has led to increasing numbers of organizations sending employees on international assignments to learn more about applying global strategies to local problems (Stroh *et al.*, 2000). The 2014 Global Relocations Trends Survey Report highlights that there has been a 50 percent increase in international assignee populations since 2011 (Brookfield, 2014). International assignments often last several years and management typically assume that repatriates will not find their return particularly difficult (Paik *et al.*, 2002). Previous research has revealed however, that turnover rates amongst repatriates range from 20% to 50% within the first year of return (Black *et al.*, 1999). These figures are supported by more recent research which has shown that approximately 58% of Taiwanese repatriates were seriously considering leaving their organizations (Lee & Liu, 2007). The economic and strategic costs to organizations as a result of losing repatriates are substantial (Stroh, 1995).

Exploring the effects of international assignments and the repatriation process on repatriates' turnover intention in a Saudi Arabian context is particularly novel, because of the importance placed on international assignments in Saudi Arabia. Government pressure has been exerted on private organizations to create employment opportunities for national workers because 60% of Saudis under 40 are unemployed (Mellahi, 2007). Private organizations have been encouraged by the government to provide international education and training for their staff (Looney, 2004) believing that this will help to build a trained national workforce that will contribute to the country's future (Madhi & Barrientos, 2003). As a result, large Saudi organizations are investing heavily in international assignments.

Research on repatriation turnover has centered on the expatriate cycle of adjustment (Scullion & Brewster, 2001); reentry reverse culture shock (Wang, 1997), and problems associated with lack of promotion or career progression upon return (Dickmann *et al.*, 2008). While this

research may enhance the theory and practice of specific repatriation human resource (HR) policies to improve retention, to date there is limited research that considers how employees come to perceive certain organizational practices as signaling obligations pre assignment and how employees perceive the meaning of their experiences such as 'promotion' or 'lack of career advancement' upon repatriation, in specific contexts. Since international assignments often last several years, expectations often change pre, during and post assignment to the extent that repatriates may perceive a gap between their expectations and organizational obligations when they return (Andreason & Kinneer, 2005). Accordingly, we argue that the psychological contract offers a very valuable framework for investigating the sense-making during the repatriation process. Therefore, our aim here is to explore Saudi Arabian repatriates' perceptions of whether their psychological contract was fulfilled or breached post-international assignment. Specifically we examine the content of, and the way in which the promises and obligations comprising the psychological contract were conveyed to repatriates pre-assignment and (re)interpreted post-assignment. We examine these in relation to the specific HR policies/practices and other informal organizational practices that were used to manage the entire international assignment in two Saudi organizations.

### **Psychological Contract Research**

Over the last twenty years, the psychological contract has received considerable attention in an effort to understand employment relationships (Conway & Briner, 2009). The term 'psychological work contract' can be tracked to the early works of Argyris (1960), Levinson *et al.* (1962), and Schein (1965a). Whilst this work or, as Herriot (1995) labels them, 'classical early studies', place an emphasis on differing perceptions across management and employees of the mutual obligations that constitute the contract, contemporary research has tended to focus solely upon employees' beliefs about promises and obligations, and stresses that a

psychological contract is constituted in the mind of the employee alone (Herriot, 1995; Morrison & Robinson, 1997). This reflects how the meaning of the concept has changed over time.

The most widely acknowledged definition of the psychological contract states *'the psychological contract of employment is the understandings people have, whether written or unwritten, regarding the commitments made between themselves and their organization'* (Rousseau, 1990:391). Rousseau's work (1989; 1990; 1995; 1998) distinguishes itself by assigning a larger weight to the exchange features of the psychological contract, whilst recognizing employees' individual subjective interpretation of its terms. Rousseau's (1989) reconceptualization of the psychological contract highlights both the implicit and explicit nature of promises, shaping expectations and obligations, which influences our understanding of the way in which perceptions of the psychological contract can be investigated. In particular, Rousseau (1990) emphasizes that the psychological contract is related to employees' beliefs about the exchange of obligations that exist between employees and their organization: *'the understandings people have, whether written or unwritten, regarding the commitments made between themselves and their organization'* (Rousseau, 1990:391). Rousseau therefore views the psychological contract as highly subjective but importantly her definition highlights that *formal and informal* management practices are a key constituent of the context and significantly shape the way in which individual's psychological contract develop.

Other research has suggested that the beliefs embedded in the psychological contract are also shaped by (i) pre-employment factors; such as inner motivation and personal values (Schein, 1965b), (ii) work experience; such as through socialization and observation (Rousseau, 1995b); and (iii) the broader social context (Westwood *et al.*, 2001). Thus there is general agreement that directly or indirectly organizational practices, and policies play a key role in establishing

and shaping psychological contracts (Conway & Briner, 2005; Guest, 1998; Rousseau, 1995b). Rousseau (1995b) points out that, employees derive the terms of their psychological contracts in three ways: (1) Mutual obligations are specifically articulated by others, such as during the recruitment process, for example; (2) Employees watch and observe the way in which managers and colleagues interact and how the organization treats them; and (3) The organization delivers a number of structural signals, which are predominantly centered on HR processes (e.g. performance reviews, benefits and compensation systems), and organizational documents, which both have a key role in shaping employees' perceptions of mutual obligations (Rousseau, 1990, 1995b).

Individuals therefore evaluate their responsibilities or obligations towards the organization and compare to what they perceive are the organization's responsibilities towards them and, in so doing employees will naturally amend their behaviour in line with critical outcomes (Anderson & Schalk, 1998; Rousseau, 1990; Shore & Tetrick, 1994). One key line of enquiry in psychological contract studies has therefore been investigations into the effects of perceived breaches or fulfillment of the contract on behaviour. Previous research conceptualized psychological contract fulfillment as employees' perceptions of organizational support (Guzzo *et al.*, 1994) and breaches were defined as *'employee perceptions that their organization failed to meet one or more obligations associated with perceived mutual promises'* (Robinson & Morrison, 2000:526). Importantly, when employees perceive that their psychological contract has been fulfilled, research suggests that they experience greater job satisfaction, intend to stay with the organization, and trust management (Robinson, 1996; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003; Turnley & Feldman, 2000). If employees perceive that the organization has failed to fulfill one or more obligations, however, a breach is considered to have occurred, which can lead to employees experiencing feelings of betrayal of trust and unfairness which can affect their intentions to remain in the organization (Ho *et al.*, 2004; Lee *et al.*, 2011)

The limited literature around what generates perceptions that contracts have been breached suggests that these could be related to weak HRM practices (Guest *et al.*, 2004), perceptions of a lack of organizational support more generally (Tekleab *et al.*, 2005), or perception of inequity when comparisons are made by employees (Conway & Briner, 2002b). We argue here that HRM policies/practices and informal organizational norms have the most profound impact on the formation and development of the psychological contract. Further in the context of the research presented here, we argue that repatriates' perceptions of their psychological contract are based largely on their perceptions of how well or otherwise HR professionals have managed their expatriation and repatriation experience. A significant body of research argues HR practices and policies, such as training, compensation, performance appraisal, recruitment, and promotion all communicate 'organizational' promises (Guest, 1998; Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Rousseau & Greller, 1994; Sparrow, 1998b). In other words, these promises over time and across different cultural contexts generate mental schema, which accordingly map out personal understandings of the employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995b; Sparrow, 1996). However, there are few studies that examine employees' perceptions of organizational practices during times of change, such as international assignments, or focus upon this in an Eastern cultural context, when more cross-cultural research has been advocated (Sparrow, 1998a, 1998b). Transitions, such as that from being an expatriate to becoming a repatriate, are likely to trigger individuals to reflect upon their expectations and perceived obligations upon their return and, we suggest, there is a likelihood that some of the beliefs associated with their psychological contract may no longer be salient.

### **Research on repatriate's psychological contract**

There is somewhat of a disconnect across the psychological contract and the repatriation literature. In the psychological contract literature Lewis (1997) offers a "breakdown model",

which portrays the mechanisms constituting the employment relationship in this particular situation, such as the extent of organizational support, in order to identify possible assignment difficulties. However this model merely capture assignee's perceptions of the employment relationship during the assignment rather than their perceptions and experiences pre, during and post assignment (Pate & Scullion, 2009). Guzzo *et al.* (1994) also demonstrated the relevance of psychological contract theory to understanding expatriate's experiences. Yet, their model abstracts the psychological contract as a mediating variable between organization's practices and employee commitment. Therefore again it does not focus upon potentially changing perceptions of the psychological contract during and post international assignment and the potential consequences of this (Pate & Scullion, 2009).

The repatriation literature, suggest that, following extended periods of time in another country, repatriates often question previous understanding of mutual expectations and obligations (Paik *et al.*, 2002; Sussman, 2001). It is not uncommon, for example, for repatriates to have particularly high expectations in terms of their career prospects upon return, particularly when individuals have been identified as high-potential employees, which is likely to have been the basis for their selection for international assignments (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). Earlier research also suggests that repatriate's expectations are often based on informal 'promises' that employees have inferred that management have made (Schell & Solomon, 1997). However other research has also suggested that for repatriates the implicit possibilities for career advancement often remain unfulfilled (Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Harvey, 1989) but this has not been explored in great depth, or with explicit reference to the psychological contract or, indeed, in an Eastern organizational context.

More recent research suggests that in broad terms repatriates compare their perceptions of the rewards and recognition the organizations provide following their assignments with the



sacrifices and contributions they perceive that they have made during the assignment (Andreason & Kinneer, 2005). The greater the perceived fairness, the greater the probability that repatriates employees will remain in the organization (Rousseau, 2001). This supports our argument that psychological contracts are reflected upon and reviewed by repatriates upon their return and concurs with Rousseau (2001) who suggests that psychological contracts are regularly revised. Since psychological contracts are founded on mental schema of perceived promises and mutual obligations as attributed by the employee (Rousseau, 2001), international experience may alter this schema, and create incongruence between an individual's and those of the organization (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005).

During the expatriation cycle, repatriation is usually the phase where employees experience specific uncertainties and anxieties, concerning change of income and lifestyle (Suutari & Brewster, 2003), problems of adjustment to home culture and organization (Baruch & Altman, 2002), and reverse culture shock (Hurn, 1999). Other studies have revealed that repatriates often develop a negative attitude toward their organization when they perceive a lack of support upon their return (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012), which consequently influences job satisfaction (Cho *et al.*, 2012). The high turnover rates amongst repatriates in some studies (Baruch *et al.*, 2002; Yan *et al.*, 2002) supports these ideas in so far as they have been explained as indicators of the failure of organizations to effectively manage employees' expectations, leading to perceptions that the organization has failed to fulfill its implicit promises. More specifically, Yan *et al.* (2002) offer a model of the agency relationship and the psychological contract and suggest that any mismatch between the assignee's and the organization's expectations leads to assignment failure with undesirable outcomes, such as repatriate turnover. Whilst their research has noted that the psychological contract can evolve and change over time, it does not address the contextual complexities surrounding its evolution. Our review of the literature therefore suggests that systematically exploring repatriates' perceptions of the

evolution of the psychological contract pre, during and post assignment offers a valuable way of investigating the sense-making processes repatriates engage upon when they return, to determine whether their psychological contracts have been fulfilled or breached.

## **Method**

A qualitative, comparative case study approach was adopted in this research (Yanow & Ybema, 2009). This approach allowed us to explore the complexities surrounding the evolution of the psychological contract in specific contexts. Specifically how repatriates come to perceive certain organizational practices pre and post assignment as constituting organizational obligations, which influence employees' perceptions of the meaning and value of their international experience for themselves and their organizations. It would be very difficult for investigate this complex phenomenon using a survey instrument. Therefore, close, in-depth questioning and probing was required using semi-structured interviews conducted with both repatriates and HR managers. This enabled a comparison to be developed of each parties understanding, and the implementation of informal and formal policies and practices associated with international assignments, and the meaning and value placed on them from a management and employee perspective. It also enabled identification of the organizational policies and practices that had had a positive or negative impact on repatriates' perceptions of their psychological contract upon their return. In particular, HR manager interviews focused upon gaining an understanding of each organization's approach to selection for assignment; how international assignments were managed and the repatriation process. Access was also provided to numerous company documents pertaining to each organization's internationalization strategy and HR policies, which was supplemented with background material offering more contextual information (e.g. annual reports, mission statements, reports for shareholders, and transcripts of chief executives' speeches, press releases, advertisements, and public relations material). These additional sources also served to more fully explore and

support employees' perceptions of whether their psychological contract had been breached or fulfilled upon their return and why they held these perceptions.

Two large private Saudi Arabian organizations were selected for comparison on the basis that they both operated subsidiaries throughout the world which increased the possibility that they had sophisticated international HR management policies (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989) and both made massive investments in international training and development aligned with government policy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 74 employees (60 repatriates and 14 human resource managers) in the two organizations between 2012 -2013. Repatriates were recruited voluntarily from long lists provided by each firm of those repatriated within the last 12 months. This selection criterion was applied in order that participants would be readily able to recall and articulate what they perceived as mutual obligations upon their return, how and why they had developed these perceptions and the practical career outcomes they had experienced. International assignments had ranged from one to six years and included both educational (going abroad to study for a Masters or PhD qualification) and practical/role based assignments. The average age of respondents was 33. 97% were male and 3% female (for a detailed overview of the repatriates in this study see Table 1 and 2). Interviews lasted between 45–60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Interviews that had been conducted in Arabic were translated into English. Cross-translation of specific sections of the English transcriptions were translated back to Arabic by a third party, to ensure that the meaning after translation had not changed.

The interview schedule was organized around major themes derived from the literature review, such as repatriates' and HR managers understanding of how and why they had been selected for international assignment, the international assignment and how it was managed etc. A reflexive and flexible approach to questioning was adopted in order to explore further themes

which emerged from the interviews whilst maintaining a focus on key themes identified in the literature.

Data analysis was inductive in line with a qualitative approach (Yin, 1992). Interview transcriptions, organizational documents, and field notes were reviewed to identify the major themes that were supported or refuted by the data. During this process, dominant themes and key concepts were categorized and converted to codes. Coding was carried out in a three-stage process, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The first stage of coding was based on the dominate themes identified across the literature. For example, all repatriate's adjustment difficulties that have been identified in the literature were included in the initial coding including for example, reentry reverse culture shock (Wang, 1997) and lack of promotion or career development upon return (Dickmann *et al.*, 2008; Doherty & Dickmann, 2007); In the second stage of coding, only those items that pertained to the formal HR policies and informal practices (if, and where they existed) effecting the psychological contract in terms of mutual obligations were included, hence reverse culture shock was precluded. In the third stage of analysis, axial coding was performed. This process comprises core category selection, which focuses on the category of data that accounts for the majority of the variations across the central phenomenon under examination, and around which the various other groups are integrated (Kendall, 1999). This process and the coding are shown in Figure 1. For example, 'repatriates assignment to a suitable role that utilized their international assignment' and 'recognition for undertaking the international assignment' were grouped together into the theme of 'The rhetoric and reality of the formal HR policies and informal practices associated with international assignments post assignment'.

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INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

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Next the findings are presented across the two case study firms.

## **Findings**

### ***Oil-Co***

Since the 1980's there has been emphasis on developing what were referred to as 'world-class' learning programmes in Oil-Co to equip Saudis employees with knowledge and skills and the firm offers both international educational assignments and role based assignments. HR managers believed that even on educational assignment Saudi employees gained a better understanding of the broad functioning of international business and societies. Role assignments involved 18 months of overseas training. During this time, the trainee was exposed to the way in which particular subsidiaries operated their businesses.

On the face of it, the overarching policy was likely to have positive outcomes for both the organization and employees, but the findings suggest that outcomes were very different. The data highlighted that in practice HR managers largely focused upon fulfilling the basic requirements of 'managing' an international assignment i.e. nominating, selecting, and sending sufficient numbers of employees on international assignments. It appeared that their goals were disconnected from the stated strategic concerns of developing a talented workforce of internationally trained managers. Table 3 provides illustrative data that suggest that despite the rhetoric propounded in interviews whereby HR managers claimed to design assignments to meet the organization's business needs, in practice international assignments were poorly planned and limited in scope.

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INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

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The majority of repatriates emphasised that despite the stated HR policy, most HR practices in Oil-Co, including the selection criteria for international assignments, promotion and career development were only very loosely defined, and very few HR practices were formalized or transparent. 90% of repatriates stated that they were very dissatisfied with the way the organization designed their overseas assignment. For example, 55% of those who were sent on educational assignment indicated that they had been sent to specialise in a field that was not relevant to their job role. Repatriates repeatedly referred to the ‘fact’ that:

*We have been sent to do a degree for the sake of doing the degree. The company don't utilize what we have learned, and they don't care. (Exploration system analysis, 30 years old, expatriate to Canada for 2 years on an educational assignment)*

A similar frustration was shared by employees who were sent on role assignments. Almost two thirds of repatriates believe that HR managers were eager to impress their senior managers by rapidly putting together an international training plan, instead of spending sufficient time planning international assignments to meet actual business needs. A common response was:

*Here, they train people just to prove that they have a great training programme. The image is great, but they haven't made sure that whatever we've learned is applicable to whatever they are going to do in the future. (Petroleum Engineer, 26 years old, expatriate to Scotland for 15 months on work assignment)*

There was therefore a mismatch between what was claimed by HR managers and what was perceived by repatriates in terms of the design and management of international assignments. Yet when HR managers were challenged on this practice an HR manager responded:

*Let's go back and ask the employees this question: 'Why did you accept an assignment in an area that you knew you would not be working in?' I am not forcing any employees*

*to go. When an employee is nominated to go on an educational assignment, we don't threaten them; we don't force them; and it is like "Do you want to go and study finance?" Even though their work is not related to finance, they accept.*

This suggests that if employees were well aware that the assignments they were being sent on were unrelated to their current role then they were agreeing to take them on because they had positive, but largely undefined expectations around outcomes (promotion or career development) when they returned.

Interviews with HR managers suggested an absence of a well-defined and structured promotion policy in Oil-Co which potentially explains why repatriates would take assignments unrelated to their current expertise/role. An HR manager stated:

*There isn't a clear policy about promotion; there are only guidelines. The only clear part is when you screen the candidate according to the GPA, years of service with the company, and appraisal categories. Even those criteria have leeway, which are outside policy..... we don't have a clear policy, only guidelines.*

The lack of clear promotion criteria raised further questions of fair treatment among repatriates. Almost 60% perceived promotion policies to be unfair, unclear or misleading. Several commented on the way in which senior management seemed to act ambiguously and line managers wielded considerable decision-making power. For example, one repatriate stated:

*There should be more transparency in the promotion system to show people their options. If the system is clear, it will be my option to decide to stay in the field or go abroad to get a degree. Some people are not even interested in the PhD; they went only for the grade code, and in the end, they didn't get it. (Petroleum engineer, 28 years old, PhD holder, expatriated to the UK for 3 years on an educational assignment)*

Another stated:

*The company rules about promotion are not clear. There are no clear rules about when you are entitled to promotion. Some people think it is after three years; others believe it's after four years. There is no transparency. They like to keep the rules ambiguous. Promotion goes back to the manager, which is one of Oil-Co's biggest problems. The person who controls your career is your direct manager. What if he doesn't like you? One of our problems as Saudis is we don't separate our personal feelings from our job. There is no fairness. (Petroleum Engineer, 30 years old, expatriated to the USA for 2 years on an Educational assignment)*

HR managers also confirmed that in practice promotion decisions were taken by the immediate, line managers stating:

*There is a clear policy about promotion. It tells you that it's up to the department to nominate while the candidate is in an advance degree programme. There are some departments who never do, as they argue that promotion is related to performance and the assignment is related to academia. Promotion depends on the manager; if I want to promote you while you are on the assignment as a manager, I have this authority. Some managers will argue that he is studying, and he shouldn't get promoted, while others will argue that he should be promoted.*

This suggests that devolving decision making to line managers with no predefined promotion criteria allowed subjectivity to predominate in promotion decisions in Oil-Co and this had negative consequences. This supports McDermott<sup>1</sup> *et al.* (2013) view that line managers are critical in terms of whether employees view their psychological contract as having been fulfilled or breached. The majority of repatriates and 70% of HR managers highlighted that promotion depended upon “*who you know*” i.e. a form of nepotism which is referred to as *wasta* in Eastern contexts (Hutchings & Weir, 2006).



It is also important to note that HR managers did not see a need to offer cultural training to employees before their assignments. The data suggests (see Table 3) that HR managers believed that such training was not really necessary because of what they believed were the cultural similarities between Oil-Co and Western organizations. In practice this was incorrect. An HR manager also stated: *“our employees can fit anywhere”*. This highlights the way in which Oil-Co managers perceived the organization to be ‘progressive; or Western though all of them had never worked anywhere other than Saudi Arabia. Here however they appeared to be making comparisons between Oil-Co and other Saudi organizations, rather than international organizations

Prior to assignment the data also suggests that repatriates believed that they had been identified as potential high-achievers to be sent on international assignment (see Table 3) and they therefore had high expectations that taking on an international assignment would enhance their career progression and enrich their self-development. However, it is important to note that these expectations were largely grounded in assumptions that they had made, rather than any explicit promises made by management or indeed formal HR policies. Their expectations were therefore based largely upon their perceptions of organizational norms:

*....usually it goes with it. You do well in your master’s, you come back, you show them that you can apply what you have learned, and you get promoted. But there is nothing in the GI which says that if you get a degree, you are promoted. Usually when people come back and have three or four years’ experience and a master’s degree, they get promoted; this is the norm in the organization. (Petroleum Engineer, 32 years old, PhD holder, expatriate to Australia for 1 year and the USA for 4 years on an educational assignment)*

These career advancement expectations were a symbolic manifestation of the purported ‘value’ placed on international assignments that senior management often propounded. In line with

psychological contract theory (Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Rousseau, 1989; Shore & Tetrick, 1994), promises are not limited to verbal or written obligations but also perceived by implication made in the course of everyday interactions. Psychological contract theory focuses not only on explicit policies and practices that shape expectations around mutual obligations but also on any construction arising from interpretations concerning employee and employer behaviour, which was clearly evident here.

Upon repatriation, employees started to realize that many aspects of the organizational mission statement, such as '*unlocking the company's full human potential*', in practice meant very little and was largely rhetoric. Repatriates began to view the international assignment rather like an organizational ritual from a managerial perspective, rather than a key aspect of employee's professional/career development. Repatriates felt a considerable degree of frustration with both the process and outcomes associated with repatriation as they had expected career advancement and/or promotion upon their return. However, there was very little evidence of long-term planning concerning repatriates' careers. Despite having high expectations before they left, in practice employees went on international assignments without knowing the effect this would have on their career or, to what role they would return.

While repatriates were on international assignments, they were typically in higher-level positions and they were offered challenging tasks. This seemed to exacerbate their disappointment when they returned which was typically to their previous job roles. This is in line with (Yan *et al.*, 2002) findings that indicated that repatriates often experience feelings of frustration when they return to their previous job. Moreover, almost 80% of repatriates reflected negatively on the lack of explicit HR policies in Oil-Co upon their return, which meant that they did not have a clear understanding of the consequence of the assignment for their careers. All of the repatriates believed that HRM policies and practices were

disorganised, and not well thought-out. On this basis, repatriates found it difficult to return to Oil-Co, stating for example:

*When you leave to study for your master's, you start thinking out of the box. When you come back to work, they want to put you inside the box...so many barriers. (Computer operating system specialist, 32 years old, expatriate to the USA for 2 years on an educational assignment).*

*During my first week back, they assigned me to work on a proposal. So I explained to my manager that we should do this and that. This is my area of expertise; I know what I am doing. My manager told me that this was not the USA, and it doesn't work like that here. Let's do it our way. I asked him why he had sent me to the States then, if he didn't like the way they handled business there. Why had he spent all that money, if in the end we did things as before. If you don't want changes, you shouldn't have sent us there to begin with, and then we come back disappointed. (Petroleum Engineer, 28 years old, expatriate to Dubai ,Qatar ,Algeria and USA for 17 months on work assignment).*

Overall the findings highlight that repatriates perceived that management had in fact breached their psychological contract by not adequately fulfilling their obligations. The findings also suggest that during international assignment repatriates largely assimilated to overseas cultures. The experience of living and working abroad had quite a profound effect which also created difficulties around readjustment on their return. They started to reflect negatively on local organizational practices and began to reject the notion that the organization was in fact progressive. 90% of repatriates were frustrated to the point where they were thinking of leaving Oil-Co, because they felt their international experience was not valued.

This finding is consistent with prior empirical research findings (Conway & Briner, 2002a; Kickul *et al.*, 2004; Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), it has been shown that

psychological contract breach has various negative consequences on work behaviours and may be taken as a plausible explanation for the high turnover rate of repatriates (Eugenia Sánchez Vidal *et al.*, 2007; Stahl *et al.*, 2009; Suutari & Brewster, 2003).

### ***Chemo-Co***

Chemo-Co is a petrochemical company that was established in 1976 with the strategic aim that Saudi Arabia become less reliant on oil as its major economic resource. The organization takes a strategic role in facilitating job creation in Saudi Arabia. Chemo-Co's long-term aim is to expand its global network and double sales by 2020. In order to achieve this, the organization invests heavily in training Saudi employees to attain the technical and managerial skills that will enable the firm to compete in international markets. Chemo-Co offers four types of international assignments, each with well-defined objectives and goals:

- (1) Special project assignment: These involve sending 15-20 assignees to work with international contractors to build new factories or expand existing plants. Employees work alongside the contractor during the construction design and commissioning. The aim is for assignees to gain experience and develop knowledge of plant build and maintenance. Assignees are also charged with training local employees to work in these plants when they return.
- (2) Career development assignment: These involve sending high potential employees abroad for on-the-job training programmes. The aim of this assignment is to expose assignees to other cultures and prepare them for managerial positions within Chemo-Co when they return.
- (3) Critical roles assignment: These involve sending managers from SA headquarters to an international branch business to ensure that processes are consistent worldwide.

- (4) Higher education assignment: These involve the sponsorship of engineers and those employees identified as high-potential to take Master's/ PhD or both degrees simultaneously at international, top-tier universities.

The organization has two departments that deal with international assignments: talent management (TM), and global mobility (GMC). TM's role involves the identification, selection and approval of employees to fill key roles on global assignments in either the Middle East, Europe, America, and Asia-Pacific. GMC is involved in managing the movement of Chemo-Co assignees from one global location to another. The team aims to administer a smooth transition for employees relocating globally. Guidance on travel plans, housing, education, and other needs is provided from the initial transition to repatriation. GMC teams are specifically involved in all of the processes associated with pre-departure/relocation, on-assignment, and repatriation. Table 4 provides illustrative examples from the data that suggest that Chemo-Co had a well-structured and explicit HR system for managing international assignments and repatriation.

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In particular, the findings highlight that the organization had a well-defined promotional route as well as policies and procedures specifically for repatriates. Before employees were expatriated management explicitly informed them that they would be promoted upon their return. The HR manager stated:

*Normally, when Chemo-Co invests in a person he will be promoted to a higher position when he comes back in recognition of his degree, (if he was sent on an educational*

*assignment, his knowledge, and his experience. Typically an employee will get promoted directly when he returns.*

He also commented on the transparency of the process for those taking on an educational assignment:

*Employees who go on educational assignments have a clear promotion process. For example, employees get certain benefits and grades when they come back holding a Master's degree. Also they have different benefits and grades when they come back with a PhD degree. The organization has a clear defined ladder for employees who go on educational assignments.*

A similar process was applied for those on training assignments:

*Before an employee goes on the role assignment, he will receive a formal document indicating which job he will get when he comes back. It's part of the documents that he needs to sign before he leaves. We have the talent management team, which works intensively on this subject. They have a plan to make sure that the employee knows what he will get when he comes back.*

Employees, who were on the managerial career track indicated that they too believed that there was a well-defined promotion path:

*I knew that taking the assignment would make me excel to the higher level of the organization. This means it would open an opportunity for promotions, and that's what happened (Marketing Manager, 39 years old, expatriated to Singapore 5 years on role assignment).*

Employees therefore knew exactly what the outcome would be from the international assignment, in terms of rewards and promotions. All those on the managerial career track or

an educational assignment who were interviewed had been eager to participate in these programmes. This supports literature (Barbuto, 2005; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Kelman, 1958) that demonstrates that instrumental rewards can motivate employees when they perceive their work leads to specific extrinsic tangible outcomes such as pay, promotions, bonuses, etc. Employees reported that Chemo-Co offered the prospect of a very rewarding career for repatriates, and, in turn, they understood their obligation when undertaking assignments. As such, the organization has made explicit promises of career development to those who accepted these assignments.

However, repatriates who were on the technical track did suggest that the criteria applied for promotion differed across managerial and technical routes. This created some frustrations as the technical career ladder was viewed as highly complex process to navigate. In contrast repatriates on the managerial ladder secured automatic promotion upon their return. One repatriate explained:

*The promotion system on the technical ladder changed. Everybody here has to face a committee before getting promoted; it is like a grand jury. A researcher stands in front of a group of experts, and they give him about half an hour to give a presentation about his work from day one in the company. They ask for his accomplishments and everything that he has done. After he finishes the committee starts to ask him questions. It's exactly like doing a PhD, and then they start discussing with each other whether he deserves to be promoted. This entire process is just to get promoted, while other people get promoted when they are just sitting at their desks on the managerial track and they get promoted every four years (Scientist, 35 years old, expatriated for 5 years to UK for Masters and PhD degree).*

Chemo-Co differentiates management roles distinctly from technical roles. Culturally Saudis tend prefer to work in administrative and managerial positions as previous research has highlighted that Saudis are primarily motivated by position and status (Achoui, 2009; Al-Kibsi *et al.*, 2007; Madhi & Barrientos, 2003; Mellahi & Wbod, 2001). This, along with the difficulties in securing promotion upon their return if on the technical career ladder offers some explanatory power as to why repatriates had a clear preference to be placed on a managerial career path in Chemo-Co.

Chemo-co also provided many types of cross-cultural training including pre-assignment training, cross-cultural awareness, specific country briefing, language training and repatriation training. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the organization kept communication channels open between the expatriate and the organization throughout assignments to avoid the so-called “out of sight-out of mind” phenomenon. Thus, it seems that Chemo-Co had given considerable attention to addressing the uncertainties that expatriates might typically face when they moved to another country. Furthermore, the organization developed a range of expatriation and repatriation support practices, such as pre-departure career discussions, training and repatriation job planning, which are likely to have helped assignees to develop a realistic picture of the repatriation process and outcomes. The findings unsurprisingly therefore highlighted that the majority of repatriates had more realistic expectations of outcomes compare to Oil-Co repatriates because they knew explicitly and in advance what the possible outcome of the international assignment would mean for their future careers. Here employees’ expectations were formed through explicitly defined HR policies, organizational practices and processes and they played a major role in shaping the nature of the psychological contract that existed between the organization and employees (c.f. Rousseau, 1995).

Upon repatriation, most of the repatriates were also assigned to a role that aligned with the skills they had developed during their international assignment. Eighty-five per cent of the



repatriates in this organization indicated that they had been placed in a position in which they had an opportunity to use the knowledge and skills they had acquired during the overseas assignment. One repatriate noted:

*I think we have very smart management, and they can use everybody to their fullest. They offered me my current job five months before my return. It's very relevant to both my international experience and my previous experience in supply chain management. (General manager, 53 years old, expatriated to Singapore and Egypt on work assignment for 7 years)*

When the 10% of repatriates in Chemo-Co who stated that they had not been assigned to a role that they believed matched their international experience and subsequently requested a departmental transfer, this was also approved:

*I came back to the same position. Nothing had changed and this is what I expected. Nonetheless, I created a job for myself after I talked to the manager convincing him that we must have simulations in the department (Mega project manager, 35 years old, expatriated for 2 years to the USA for role assignment).*

Management therefore appeared to adopt a flexible approach in order to meet repatriate's expectations. It also demonstrates that management was strategically focused upon understanding how repatriates could use the knowledge and experience they have acquired while working or studying abroad in their future roles.

Unlike Oil-Co where very often the repatriates' concerns over promotion had not been met, in Chemo-Co 95% of the repatriates did gain promotion upon return, even when they had no specific expectations. For example, one repatriate stated:

*Management told me that I shouldn't be concerned about getting promoted, but I got promoted without having any expectations. I succeeded in my assignment there and I was*

*promoted from engineer to a global manager (Global manager, 33 years old, expatriate for 3 years to Italy for role assignment).*

In addition the majority of repatriates believed that the repatriation process was handled professionally and described their readjustment returning to Chemo-co as very smooth. Most repatriates therefore believed that Chemo-Co had managed their expectations appropriately and met its obligation towards them in terms of promotion and new assignment responsibilities. Therefore in Chemo-Co there was not a gap between repatriates' expectations and what occurred in practice, upon their return. If repatriates feel recognized and rewarded for taking on international assignments, it is likely that it will have a positive impact on their intention to remain with the organization (Kraimer *et al.*, 2009). Ninety per cent of those interviewed stated that they had a strong intention to remain with Chemo-Co for their entire careers. Repatriates' appeared therefore to demonstrate loyalty and commitment. Three repatriates stated:

*I am loyal to Chemo-Co. I think Chemo-Co is the best company in Saudi Arabia in terms of developing its employees, because you meet people of all different nationalities, and work on different products. You have to work under extreme pressure. You wouldn't have this high exposure if you worked in a local small company (Project executive, 28 years old, expatriated to the USA for 2 years for role assignment).*

*I believe that I have a future in this company, and I will have an effect on it in the future, especially after I got the MBA certificate. Now I feel more active after my return. There are a lot of learning investments in the company and this is the right time for me to benefit from these investments (Product specialist on the technical ladder, 37 years old, expatriated to UK for 2 years for MBA degree).*

Repatriates believed that Chemo-co provided very supportive HR policies and practices to facilitate expatriation and repatriation. This finding is in line with previous research that has

argued that employees who perceive support from their organization feel obligated to “pay back” in terms of effort and loyalty (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990; Rhoades *et al.*, 2001; Wayne *et al.*, 1997). Based on social exchange theory, a pattern of reciprocity develops over time between an employee and their organization, and the more employees perceive organizational support, the more they feel obligated and attached to the organization (Blau, 1964; Rousseau, 1990; Shore & Wayne, 1993).

## **Discussion**

The experiences of repatriates at Chemo-Co were therefore in sharp contrast to those in Oil-Co and it is evident that in general terms the vast majority of repatriates at Chemo-Co perceived that their psychological contracts had been fulfilled upon their return. This did not appear to be the case in Oil-Co, where the majority believed that there had been a breach and had started to re-evaluate organizational processes and practices to support international assignments and repatriation, upon their return.

We therefore suggest that the HR policies, processes and informal practices associated with international assignments in each organization contributed significantly to these outcomes i.e. they significantly influenced perceptions around expectations and mutual obligations which constitute a repatriates psychological contract. This supports previous research suggesting that the key mechanisms through which employees come to understand the terms and condition of their employment is through HRM practices (Peel & Inkson, 2000; Rousseau, 1995a; Rousseau & Wade- Benzoni, 1994). How repatriates interpreted HRM practices, particularly the possibilities for promotion, influenced the way in which they evaluated the psychological contract and their organization’s obligation to them upon their return. These finding are consistent with the literature that argues that the impact of HRM practices on employees’ psychological contract is likely to rely on how those practices are perceived and interpreted by employees (Rousseau & Wade - Benzoni, 1994) leading to perceptions of breach or

fulfillment. This research however contributes significantly to this area of enquiry in that it provides evidence of the impact of HR practices specifically associated with international assignments on the way in which repatriates developed their expectations *pre* assignment around organizational obligations upon their return and their perceptions *post* international assignment. Where there was largely congruence then repatriates perceived that their psychological contract had been fulfilled and their intention to remain in the organization was high. Where repatriates perceived incongruence or a mis-match between the expectations and organizational obligations that they had had pre and post assignment, then they perceived that their psychological contract had been breached and their intentions to remain in the organization were low. We have demonstrated therefore that repatriates' understanding of the effect of the international assignment on their career and the way in which they expected to be treated upon repatriation was evidently grounded both in the HR policies and also the informal practices used in each firm pre, during and post assignment.

By linking repatriation to the psychological contract this research has therefore demonstrated some of the complex dynamics that are inherent in the evolution and transformation of the psychological contract over time. The findings revealed that during the repatriation period perceptions of mutual obligations surface. Transition, such as that from expatriation to repatriation, trigger individuals to reflect upon their expectations and perceived obligations and previous beliefs may no longer be salient. Employees enter the process of international assignment with an implicit understanding of their psychological contract but during the international assignment perceptions of these expectations/obligations change. Previous research has started to broadly consider this in terms of reverse culture shock for example. However this research has demonstrated that post assignment repatriates compare their expectations and obligations pre and post assignment and that HR practices associated with the international assignment significantly shape these perceptions. In so doing their psychological

contract evolves. It was demonstrated that the shift of the psychological contract was affected by several dynamics including both the way in which HR practices were enacted and a re-evaluation of informal organizational norms in the case of Oil-Co (such as the primary reliance on *wasta* to determine promotion)<sup>1</sup>. This demonstrates that the constitution of the psychological contract is influenced by both formal and informal organizational practices.

This research also contributes to the debate on breaches to the psychological contract in the context of international assignments by demonstrating that employees' perceptions are influenced by the actual nature of organizational practices i.e. as being only loosely defined for example in Oil-Co, as well as the HR practices themselves, in combination with the management support received throughout the assignment as well as upon return. Further, the findings also demonstrate how following international assignments, reverse culture shock was experienced by Oil-Co repatriates who started to challenge the idea that the organization was 'progressive' and this contributed to the reformation of their psychological contract. Interestingly reverse culture shock was not experienced by Chemo-Co employees where management had maintained constant contact with them throughout their assignment. Previous research on international assignment consistently highlights that reverse culture shock is a recurring problems for repatriates (Adler, 1981; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Harvey & Novicevic, 2006). However, its effects on the psychological contract have not been explicitly addressed.

Finally, this research has demonstrated the ways in which national cultural values shape organizational HR practices. Sparrow (1998a) and (Rousseau & Schalk, 2000) have highlighted how the psychological contract is construed differently in different national contexts. However by specifically focusing upon a Saudi Arabian context, this study

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive discussion of the role of *Wasta* see Aldossari and Robertson (2015) The role of *wasta* in repatriates' perceptions of a breach to the psychological contract: a Saudi Arabian case study. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 1-20.

contributes to, and extends research in this area. It was demonstrated that *wasta*, a strong Arabic national cultural value, significantly influenced informal practices in Oil-Co and perceptions of its utility and role in promotion upon repatriation. This therefore clearly demonstrates its potential influence upon the way in which psychological contracts are constituted between employees and organizations and how breaches of the contract are considered to have occurred within the context of international assignments and repatriation in at least one Arabic culture. Psychological contract theory has been widely studied in the West, but Middle Eastern researchers have not addressed this. Western studies limit the possibility of generalising conclusions because of the very different cultural values and norms that exist in Eastern contexts. Although in recent years researchers have examined psychological contracts in countries such as Hong Kong, Japan, India and Singapore (Koh *et al.*, 2004; Lee *et al.*, 2000; Morishima, 2000; Shah *et al.*, 2000), the Middle Eastern context has not been considered. Given the distinctive nature of Arabic culture and its possible influence on employer-employee relationships, an exploration of the psychological contract within the Saudi Arabian context is not only desirable but necessary for understanding the broader national/organizational influences on the formation and maintenance of the psychological contract.

## **Conclusion**

This study has responded to calls for more cross-cultural examinations of the psychological contract and repatriation. It has also provided a number of contributions to both the repatriation and psychological contract literature. Practically our findings suggest that HR policies around all aspects of an international assignment need to be made transparent and explicit (as was the case in Chemo-Co) and line managers have a key role to play in articulating what the outcomes will be in terms of career development to employees, before they leave, and to ensure that those ‘promises’ are kept upon their return.

We do however acknowledge the limitations of this study, and highlight some of the possible implications of these for further research. Firstly, the research aimed to examine repatriates' perceptions of their expectation and obligations prior to, and following, international assignments. Clearly interviewees may have found it challenging to reflect upon and consider their expectations pre assignment and, in comparison may also have recalled their expectations post assignment fairly readily. However we believe that by focusing specifically upon HR practices throughout the entire process this reduced the possibilities of post-hoc rationalization upon repatriation. Nevertheless future research could specifically interview employees at three points in time: pre, during and post assignment to more systematically track the evolution and transformation of the psychological contract. Secondly, whilst one of the aims of this research was to investigate the possible effect of the repatriation process on repatriates' turnover intentions, the research could only focus on repatriates that were still employed, and accordingly excluded those who had already left their organizations following international assignment. A suggestion for future research therefore would be to extend the sample by interviewing both repatriates who remain with the organization and those who leave, in order to understand the differences between those who intended to leave and those who actually resigned.

Finally, this research is novel in its examination of the antecedents of the repatriates' turnover intention, with a particular focus on highly qualified, Saudi professionals. It also reveals the challenges facing human resource managers in Saudi Arabia, a setting characterised by strong cultural norms of collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and power distance (House *et al.*, 2004). These all significantly influence HR practices and cannot be overestimated. The findings of this research therefore have implications for future research in Saudi Arabia. Firstly, the study calls for more research on the turnover phenomena among repatriates in by empirically evaluating key HR practices associated with the process across organizations as these clearly

differ across organizations. Secondly the role of line managers in international assignment management and career development upon repatriation also requires further examination as again, these differed in this study. In this regard, this study offers an important contribution to our very limited understanding of Saudi Arabian employees' expectations pre and post international assignment. This is significant in light of the high level of repatriate turnover experienced in a country looking to invest heavily in the development of its national workforce to improve employment rates.



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Table 1 Repatriate profiles Oil-Co (N.40)

<b>Contextual background</b>	<b>N.</b>
Gender	
Female	2
Male	38
Age	
26 to 29 years	17
30 to 34 years	16
35 to 40 years	7
Tenure Years	
1 to 4 years	5
5 to 9 years	26
10 to 19 years	9
Job	
Petroleum/ Reservoir/ Simulation Engineers	20
Geologist/ Geophysicist	9
Systems/Computer Specialist	7
Financial/ Economist analysis	2
Exploration analysis	1
Researcher	1
Number of assignment	
One assignment	27
Two assignments	11
Three assignments	2
Duration of the assignment	
Between 1 to 2 years	26
Between 3 to 5 years	3
Between 6 to 8 years	10
Between 9 to 10 years	1
Type of the assignment	
Work assignment	12
Educational assignment	28
Bachelor degree	1
Master's degree	18
PhD degree	9

- ❖ Only two women were interviewed since there were few women repatriates at the time of the study as sending female employees on international assignment had only recently been introduced. Hence, most of the female expatriates were still on international assignments at the time of the research.

Table 2 Repatriate profiles Chemo-Co (N.20)

<b>Contextual background</b>	<b>N.</b>
Gender	
Female	0
Male	20
Age	
28 to 35 years	13
36 to 42 years	7
Tenure Years	
4 to 10 years	7
11 to 15 years	11
16 to 19 years	2
Job	
Engineers	2
Scientist	5
General/project manager	10
Specialist development	2
Researcher	1
Number of assignment	
One assignment	16
Two assignments	4
Duration of the assignment	
Between 1 to 2 years	8
Between 3 to 5 years	10
Between 6 to 7 years	2
Type of the assignment	
Work assignment	10
Educational assignment	10
Master's/ MBA degree	5
PhD	5

- ❖ While there has been considerable progress in the participation rate of females in the Saudi workforce, Chemo-Co still does not recruit women. The company remains a male- dominated organization.

**Table 3:** Oil-Co HR practices

HR practices	Illustrative example from interviews
Selection for International Assignment	<p>The selection criteria according to the company policies are: GPA comes first, the performance category comes next, and years of services come third. However, some people didn't meet the three criteria and have been sent on an international assignment. <i>(HR manager, Training and professional development advisor, 17 years' experience)</i></p> <p>This kind of information is not usually exposed to us, its management selection criteria. But as far as I know it was based on nomination from the department itself. <i>(Petroleum engineer, 29 years old, expatriated to the USA for 18 months on work assignment)</i></p> <p>I am not decision maker so I don't know what are the selection criteria for international assignment? My manager came to me at 11 am and asked me if I wanted to study for a masters' degree in geophysics, I told him I needed time to think, he told me I need your answer now. I don't know what geophysics is as my background is in computer science. So I told him I would give him my answer after the lunch break at 1 pm. He met me after the break and gave me some information about the subject, so I told him ok I would go <i>(Exploration system analysis, 27 years old, expatriated to Canada for 2 years on an educational assignment)</i></p>
Design and Plan of the International Assignments	<p>We had some situations where some employees came back in the middle of the assignment because the programme that he was assigned to in the services company was completely unrelated to his work experience, although he was one of employees with the highest potential in the company. The services companies are very flexible, they are paid huge amount of money to train our employees, the main problem stems from the person who designed the training programme. <i>(HR manager, 7 years' experience in the organization)</i></p> <p>They sent me to do a master's in geophysics, although I am an IT specialist. I thought they would move me to a different department when I came back. I came back to the same job. This is because my department doesn't need geophysics! <i>(Exploration system analysis, 30 years old, expatriate to Canada for 2 years on an educational assignment)</i></p> <p>Before I left, I was expecting this programme to have been thought through enough, and that it would be designed in a way that would boost my knowledge. I thought that when I went to a company like X (service company), which is very well known for its strong training, they would expedite my training. I thought by the time the training was finished I would have learned what was equal to three or four years of what I would have learned if I had stayed in my department and not gone on the international assignment. However, when I went to the U.S. Company, no one knew why we had been sent. X Company is like Oil-Co, a very big corporation, with many different departments and areas. The department they sent me to had nothing to do with my current work or my future job. I was really disappointed. There were no objectives for the whole programme. When I asked my direct manager in Saudi Arabia what is the objective of this training programme, he responded by saying, "Do your best". There were no clear</p>



	<p>objectives of what the expectations are of when you come back. It was a frustrating experience, because the programme was not well developed. It took my company a whole year to plan this programme, so they should have known better. <i>(Petroleum Engineer, 26 years old, expatriated to Scotland for 15 months on work assignment)</i></p> <p>They sent me on a programme just for the sake of sending me. We don't use this technology or this system. They were trying to fill the slot regardless of the business needs. The general attitude was just go there, and try to learn how they run a business. Whenever someone went to complain, they argued that they were getting paid well; they were living abroad; let it go. For me, it is a training programme. If I don't train myself it is a waste of the company's money. They don't care about the company's money <i>(Simulation Engineer, 27 years old, to Qatar, Brazil, UK, UAE, and France for 18 months on work assignment)</i>.</p>
Pre-assignment Cultural Training	<p>We don't provide pre-departure and cross-cultural training before employees go on international assignments, because Oil-Co is a very diverse organization. In the department you have employees from all around the world. So already our employees are well prepared for dealing with different cultures. <i>(Human Resource Trainer, 8 years' experience)</i></p> <p>Well in Oil-Co, from day one you join the company, you have continues training. Because it is very diverse organization, in the department you have people from all around the world. So already you well prepared for dealing with different cultures. <i>(Human Resource Manager, 11 years' experience)</i></p>

**Table 4:** Chemo-Co HR practices

HR practices	Illustrative example from interview data
Selection for International Assignment	<p>We selected employees for international assignments according to the performance evaluation matrix. The matrix evaluates WHAT employees achieved this year, and HOW the employees achieved those objectives. HOW has five categories: exceptional performance, exceeded expectations, met expectations, below expectations, or failed to meet expectations. Based on this matrix we ended up having fifteen blocks. We plotted people in these boxes, and whoever scored the highest was ranked as outstanding. The matrix helped us to identify the high potential employees and those people are selected for international assignments <i>(Talent Manager, 7 years experience)</i></p> <p>I think the selection criteria applied for everybody in the company. I am not aware whether there are exceptions or not... I think the selection criteria are applied 99% because it is a policy which must be followed... there could be exceptional cases in the high-level management, but I am not aware of such cases. <i>(Scientist, 35 years old, expatriated to the UK for 3 years for educational assignment )</i></p>

	<p>The most important criterion is the company's needs so if they need a competency development in a certain area they will focus on this area and they will select the right candidate based on qualifications, GPA in Bachelors and performance at work, but the most important two criteria is performance and academic qualifications (<i>Polymer Scientist, 33 years old, expatriated to Canada for 2 yours on educational assignment</i>).</p> <p>I think it applies for everybody, because from what I see, these people are selected based on performance and efficiency. (<i>Mega Project Leader, 35 years old, expatriated to UK, Italy, Singapore, America, and Taiwan for 5 years on work assignment</i> )</p>
Design and Plan of the International Assignments	<p>Each type of assignment had a specific set of objectives that are allied with the business needs. For example, Employees who were selected for special project assignments will be sent as a group, approximately fifteen or twenty, it depends on the requirements; they will work with contractors in Spain, America, or China. They will be over there during the period of building the factory; they will be there during the construction design and commissioning; and after that they shift the plant to Saudi Arabia. Sending these employees on such assignments will make them gain the experience and knowledge regarding how the plant was built, and how to deal with it, and then they start training our local employees to operate the plan. (<i>HR manager, 12 years experience</i>).</p> <p>Assignees will be given a career plan and an objective before they are sent abroad in order to be clear about the position that he will obtain upon his return (<i>Talent management Director, 10 years experience</i>).</p>
Pre-assignment Cultural Training	<p>After the employee agrees to take the international assignment, he will be given a five- day business trip with his wife to visit the city that he is going to live in. We want to make sure that everything is okay in terms of housing, education, and workplace (<i>Director of global mobility, 4 years experience</i>).</p> <p>We provide cross-culture training before employees go on international assignments. A third-party company that Chemo-Co has a contract with does this type of training. After he moves abroad, he will take two days, based on the global mobility policy. He will be given a tour of the city with his wife for two days. They will show him the safe areas, dangerous areas, how to shop, and how to deal with other religions. The vendor that we work with knows the Saudi culture. We asked the vendor specifically to select a female to give this training, so it can be easier and more convenient for the employee's wife. They will be given training on how his wife can shop from the market, the whereabouts of the schools, the education system for her children, how to use the transportation system and how to deal with children abroad. Saudis here might hit their child if they make a mistake, but if you do this in America, you could go to jail, but we are aware of this, so we educate our employees in order to make them aware of all the regulations and the systems in the host country When the employee leaves for his assignment, he will be very comfortable (<i>HR manager, 9 years experience</i>).</p>

Figure 1: First Order Code and Second Order Themes

## FIRST ORDER CODES ~~THESE ARE THE FIRST ORDER CODES~~ SECOND-ORDER THEMES

